

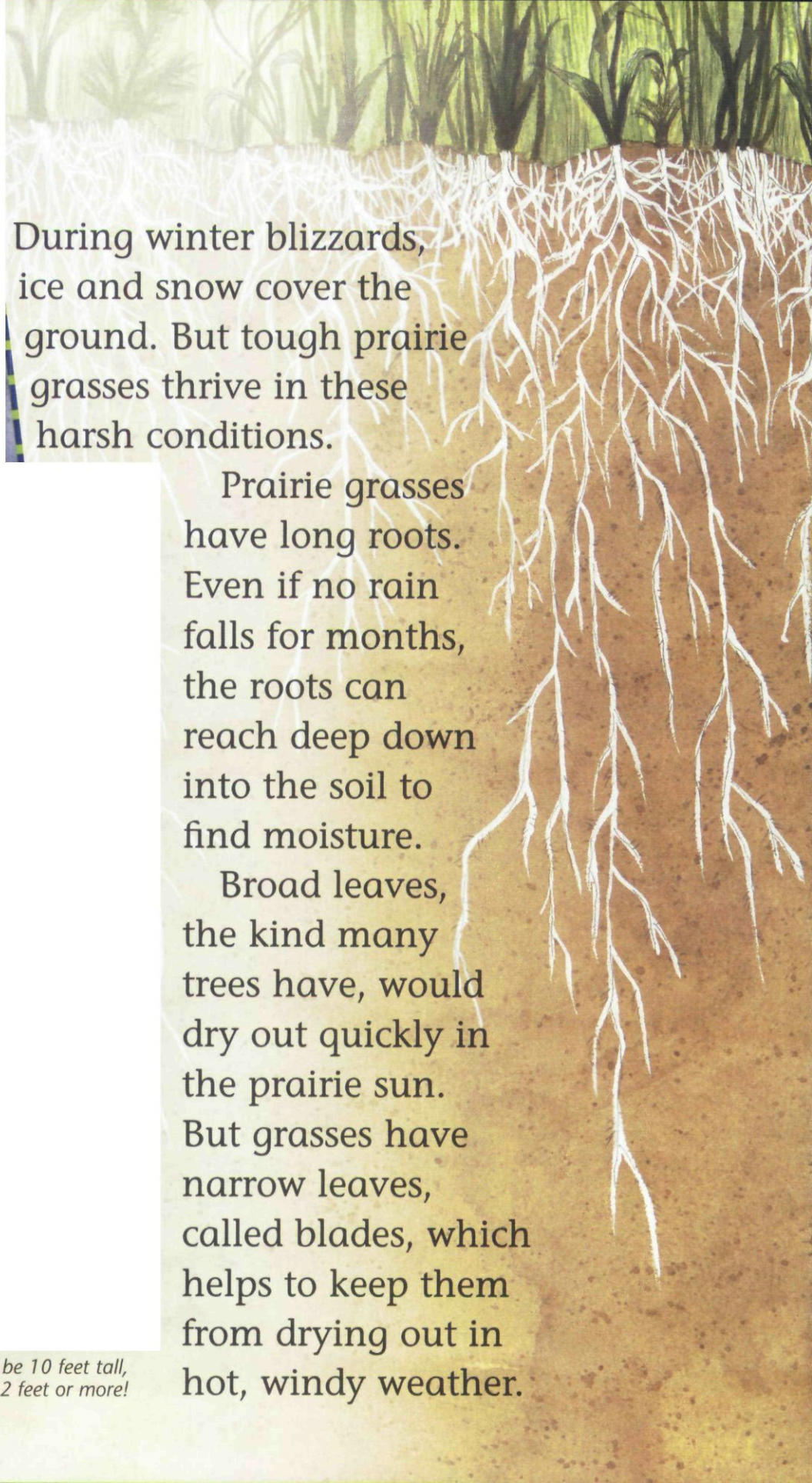
Sea of Grass

by Kathleen Weidner Zoehfeld

Imagine wading up to your shoulders in the middle of a wide, green sea. The wind blows, and you can see waves rippling and swaying all around you. But they are not waves of water—they are waves of grass! You are walking through a prairie.

The only trees or bushes you see are near rivers and streams. That's the only place where trees can find enough water. Too little rain falls on the prairie for a forest to grow. But there's just the right amount for grasses and wildflowers.

Summers on the prairie are blazing hot. Sometimes strong winds and fierce thunderstorms sweep across the open land.

An illustration showing the cross-section of a prairie. At the top, green grass blades are visible. Below the surface, a dense network of white roots extends deep into the brown soil. The roots are shown as a complex web, with many fine roots branching out from thicker ones. The soil is depicted with a textured, brownish-yellow color.

During winter blizzards, ice and snow cover the ground. But tough prairie grasses thrive in these harsh conditions.

Prairie grasses have long roots. Even if no rain falls for months, the roots can reach deep down into the soil to find moisture.

Broad leaves, the kind many trees have, would dry out quickly in the prairie sun. But grasses have narrow leaves, called blades, which helps to keep them from drying out in hot, windy weather.

Big bluestem grass can grow to be 10 feet tall, but its roots are even longer—12 feet or more!

The blades and stems of grasses are strong and flexible. Tall grass can bend and spring back even in the face of winds fierce enough to crack and topple trees.

Porcupine grass.

When it's in bloom, prairie dropseed grass smells like popcorn.

Bolts of lightning can start fires on the prairie. Grasses can survive this disaster, too. The stems and blades burn, but the roots stay protected underground. Once the fire is out, the grasses grow back quickly. The fire has even helped the grass by clearing the area of any young trees or bushes that were starting to grow.

The tough, sturdy grasses and their deep, spreading roots provide food and shelter for many animals. All the living things in the prairie depend on the grass.

Rabbits and mice scurry along the ground and tunnel into dry tufts. In a wide-open landscape, burrows make wonderful homes.




Pocket gophers like to feed on roots that grow right through the roof and walls of their burrows.

A praying mantis and a great spangled fritillary on a blazing star flower.

The Savannah sparrow builds its nest on the ground among the prairie grasses.

With few trees around, some birds build their nests on the ground. The thick grasses hide their babies and keep them safe from the hawks and eagles soaring high above.



Bluebonnets.

Many birds feed on the bees, butterflies, and other insects that are attracted to the prairie's beautiful wildflowers.

Today, most of the prairie grassland that stretched across the middle of the country has been turned into farmland. But the corn and wheat that farmers grow are types of grasses, too. They have shallower roots than the tough grasses that grew



Prairie violets.

naturally on the prairie, and they have larger seeds—which is the part we eat! But like so many animals, people too depend on the grasses that grow on the prairie.



Sunflowers.

Pretty? Yes, but flowering plants must also be tough to survive on the prairie. Like grasses, most have long roots to find moisture. Their leaves are narrow or divided into slender sections to help hold that moisture in.

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